

**Core learning elements for
social workers:
Newly qualified social worker
(NQSW) descriptors and
mandatory learning activity**

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How to use this document

This document is divided into two parts. Part one sets out each core learning element for social workers, followed by a description of what this means at the newly qualified social worker (NQSW) stage and ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice. Part two sets out the mandatory learning activity associated with the core learning elements that all NQSWs must complete to meet the SSSC continuous professional learning (CPL) registration requirements.

The core learning elements are relevant to all registered NQSWs and social work practice, regardless of setting. NQSWs, supervisors, managers and others involved in supporting NQSWs must be familiar with this document.

Part one

What are the core learning elements?

The core learning elements for social workers describe the knowledge, skills and values common to all professional social work practice regardless of setting. The NQSW descriptors reflect the characteristics of professional practice expected to develop within this early career stage and how NQSWs can demonstrate them through their practice. They build on and consolidate learning accessed through social work education and advance the professional development of NQSWs as registered social workers. They should be considered holistically with ethics, values and rights-based practice at the centre.

The core learning elements provide a framework to support NQSWs to understand and articulate the unique contribution of social work, the power and authority afforded to the protected title and responses to ethical dilemmas that arise. They are an integral part of the NQSW Supported Year and how NQSWs meet their continuous professional learning (CPL) registration requirements. The core learning elements are intended to be used within legislative and policy contexts including Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC), integrated health and social care for adults, community justice, The Promise, the Review of Adult Social Care and developing a trauma informed and responsive nation and workforce.

The development of the core learning elements has been informed by existing frameworks used to support CPL including [Continuous Learning Framework \(CLF\)](#), [Step into Leadership](#) and the [Scottish Social Services Council \(SSSC\) Codes of Practice](#). They build on the [Standards in Social Work Education \(SISWE\)](#) and are underpinned by the same ethical principles (Appendix 1) and promote the overarching responsibility of contributing to the wellbeing and safety of people, including families and carers.

This document has been developed in conjunction with the areas involved in the early implementation of the NQSW Supported Year. It builds on earlier work by a subject expert group to articulate the core characteristics of social work practice and findings from evaluation^{1 2} and research³.

How to use the core learning elements – general principles

- The core learning elements are relevant to all social work practice, regardless of setting. NQSWs will consolidate and develop their practice across all eight core learning elements.
- The core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically. Ethics, values and rights-based practice are critical to all core learning elements.
- The ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice is not intended as an exhaustive list of indicators that must be evidenced.
- NQSWs, supervisors, managers and others involved in supporting NQSWs must be familiar with the core learning elements and use them as a basis for learning opportunities, professional development planning, discussion and review.
- NQSWs will collaborate with their supervisors to identify and access learning opportunities which will help to demonstrate their individual development across the core learning elements in addition to the mandatory learning activity.
- It is important to help the NQSW identify their areas of strength, consolidation, or development across the core learning elements.
- An appreciation of [how social workers learn in the workforce](#) and the importance of workplace learning opportunities rather than a reliance on formal training courses forms the basis for how NQSWs will evidence progress against the core learning elements.

¹ [Gordon, J et al \(2020\) Evaluation of a pilot project for Newly Qualified Social Workers in Scotland](#)

² [SSSC \(2020\) Learning from the NQSW pilots and next steps in developing a supported year](#)

³ [Grant et al \(2022\) Newly qualified social workers in Scotland – a five-year longitudinal study](#)

Core learning element 1 - ethics, values and rights-based practice

	<p>Ethics, values and rights-based practice – develop an understanding of and apply ethical principles and values to all aspects of professional practice. Recognise sources and impact of social inequality and systemic oppression. Take action to protect and advocate for human rights and social justice, including development of an anti-racist, intersectional approach.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will continue to develop a strong ethical base that emphasises the importance of building a positive, professional relationship with people, including families, carers and professional colleagues. At the newly qualified stage, they will begin to show an understanding of how to actively promote and defend human rights and start to champion issues of social justice within the context of their work setting. They will recognise the contribution of social, structural and economic factors, including poverty, to people's experiences and outcomes. The NQSW will develop their critical reflection skills to recognise and put aside any personal prejudices they may have, to work within guiding ethical principles and demonstrate professional practice.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand and apply ethical principles and the SSSC Codes of Practice in all aspects of my own practice and behaviour. understand and manage the complex balance of rights, responsibility, autonomy, freedom and choice, with risk, wellbeing and protection. recognise, challenge and work to reduce social injustice through knowledge and analysis of the impact of social and structural factors on the lives of people – such as poverty, racism, poor housing, social exclusion, intersectional discrimination and disadvantage. promote and apply anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice by recognising, seeking to understand and reflecting on people's values and beliefs, diverse backgrounds, cultural characteristics, language requirements, needs, experiences, and preferences, understanding how these interact with societal structures and adjusting my practice as required. identify intentional and unintentional discrimination, recognise how identities can shape life experiences, and recognise, respect and value difference.

	<p>develop and apply the skill of advocating with or on behalf of individuals and groups.</p> <p>value and demonstrate a range of skills and qualities which recognise and promote strengths, hope, self-determination and a rights-based approach.</p> <p>develop an understanding of and confidence in clearly explaining my professional responsibilities and authority; how that contributes to my role in promoting people's wellbeing, safety and protection.</p> <p>demonstrate ethical practice in recording and sharing sensitive and confidential information at the right time and when there is a clear rationale to do so.</p> <p>actively engage with tools, resources and support that encourage self-awareness and critical reflection on how my own identity, experience, personal values and biases impact my practice.</p>
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Core learning element 2 - communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice

	<p>Communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice – demonstrate knowledge and skills to support effective communication, collaboration and relationship-based practice in a range of settings. Use trauma responsive approaches to actively involve and support the involvement of people, including families and carers to plan, implement and evaluate interventions.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will further develop and demonstrate their verbal, written and digital communication and engagement skills in a range of formal and informal settings including the legislative context of their work setting. They will begin to draw together theoretical knowledge and research to communicate effectively and confidently to a wide range of people, for different purposes and at various levels. As the NQSW progresses through the Supported Year their experience of communicating, collaborating and engaging in highly charged, complex or challenging situations will grow. NQSWs will reflect on and become more aware of power differentials, their professional authority, the use of self and relationship-based practice in developing and sustaining a relationship in changing and challenging situations and circumstances.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> value and strive to build respectful, human relationships that acknowledge diversity and are inclusive and culturally responsive, using clear, destigmatising language. demonstrate ethical practice, professionalism, professional integrity and emotional intelligence in the management of my relationships with others. develop the skills to manage professional relationships, boundaries and endings with integrity, care, compassion and respect. recognise the importance of understanding a person’s communication and engagement preferences, and use my understanding of theory, technology and practice to inform and adapt my approach to facilitate effective communication which meets their needs and abilities. use a range of skills and strategies to engage, communicate and build effective, empathetic relationships with people,

	<p>including families and carers, colleagues and other professionals in a range of settings and circumstances.</p> <p>empower people to be involved in decisions made about them, promoting rights, choice and inclusivity.</p> <p>value and take account of the expertise of people, including families, carers and other professionals involved in their lives.</p> <p>value and take account of people’s identities, beliefs and values and how these shape their experiences, including how they experience services.</p> <p>advance my ability to communicate and explain clear professional reasoning, judgements and decisions in routine, complex and challenging situations including with people, families and carers, professional decision making forums and legal hearings.</p> <p>value and promote the importance of sharing knowledge of research and best practice with people, including families and carers.</p> <p>develop confidence in identifying, collaborating and negotiating with others the need for statutory and procedural intervention, using professional authority as required.</p> <p>identify and analyse the supports and barriers to effective collaboration and participation in planning interventions and apply this knowledge to the process.</p> <p>develop and use skills and techniques, using creativity and flexibility, to elicit views, and manage change, resistance, conflict and crisis.</p> <p>value and apply the process of reviewing and evaluating interventions and outcomes with people, including families, carers and other professionals to inform practice.</p> <p>collaborate with people, families, carers, colleagues and a range of organisations to identify, assess, plan and deliver personalised services and outcomes and rights-based approaches to improve situations and outcomes.</p>
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Core learning element 3 - critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making.

	<p>Critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making - develop competence and confidence in applying critical thinking, analysis, research, and best practice to inform professional judgement and decision making in all areas of practice including assessment and review.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will develop their skills to critically reflect on their practice and analyse information to inform professional judgements, recommendations and decisions in a range of settings including the legislative context of their work setting. Their ability to provide a clear rationale verbally or in writing will play a key role in promoting self-determination, positive changes, support and protection. The NQSW will develop confidence and competence in gathering evidence, drawing on research and best practice to analyse and justify decisions. They will develop confidence in communicating their professional judgement and decisions to a variety of audiences including people, families, carers, managers, other professionals and in legal hearings. They will use supports such as supervision to make careful and complex decisions such as how and when there may be the need to intervene or to support or facilitate change or transition. They will also develop the confidence to challenge decisions of their own organisation and other professionals if they believe that the needs of people, families and carers are not being appropriately met.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> value working effectively in partnership with people, including families and carers to identify rights, needs and risks, recognising diversity and the impact of social contexts and social injustice. develop skills to gather and critically analyse multiple sources of information to inform professional decision making, incorporating and evaluating existing and new knowledge. access, understand and critically evaluate relevant research findings and literature to promote, inform and implement best practice in assessment and decision making. competently use assessment frameworks, processes and relevant legislation to assess and evaluate needs, assets, strengths and risks to agree a course of action to achieve positive outcomes.

develop confidence in exercising professional judgement based on a critical analysis of all aspects of a situation and keep complete, clear, relevant, accurate and timely records of actions, decisions and outcomes.

identify and value the need for consultation and supervision and engage in these to support complex decision making processes.

demonstrate ability to make authoritative and informed judgements where early intervention can prevent escalation of problems.

develop confidence in identifying, collaborating, explaining and negotiating with others the need for statutory and procedural intervention.

present, verbally and in writing, evidence informed assessment of strengths, needs, support requirements and risks, to people, families, carers and other professionals.

demonstrate that the views of people, including families and carers are obtained and reflected in any decisions made about them.

develop confidence in ensuring people, including families and carers understand recommendations or decisions relevant to assessments and reports about their care in advance of formal meetings.

develop confidence to use judgement and knowledge to identify unmet need and challenge systemic and management decisions of organisations including my own if needs are not being appropriately met.

Core learning element 4 - promoting wellbeing, support and protection.

	<p>Promoting wellbeing, support and protection – demonstrate and apply understanding of responsibility to actively promote the wellbeing, support and protection of children and adults at risk of harm, regardless of setting or context.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>Social workers must be aware of their responsibility to promote the wellbeing, support and protection of children and adults at risk of harm or abuse irrespective of role, setting and situation. At the NQSW level, social workers will be supported to progressively undertake work alongside more experienced colleagues in complex situations, plan and manage the delivery of care, safeguard the wellbeing of adults and children across the spectrum of protection areas and exercise statutory functions that the protected title allows. In doing this they will apply the principles of social justice and human rights and confidently and effectively learn how to challenge decisions, actions or behaviours that are not in the best interests of people, or which lead to or increase harm. They will also begin to develop an understanding of the broader impact of the wellbeing, support and protection issues on others and act accordingly. They will use supports such as supervision to reflect on structural inequalities and develop the confidence to draw attention to unequal or discriminatory treatment or policies.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify and take positive action, appropriate to own role, to promote the rights, wellbeing, support and protection of vulnerable children and adults, regardless of the practice setting and context. develop knowledge of and apply theory and research about the importance of wellbeing and the nature of harm, neglect and risk across the lifespan. develop cultural competence in decision making, recognising the impact on wellbeing of unfair or unequal treatment. develop and apply knowledge about the processes, procedures, law and policy underpinning support and protection interventions and the role of self and others.

	<p>develop knowledge and confidence to effectively apply the risk assessment and management procedures of own organisation.</p> <p>identify and take prompt action to deal with behaviour or situations that present a risk to people and reduce or contain the level of risk.</p> <p>contribute to the development, monitoring and implementation of plans to protect people and appropriately respond to changing circumstances.</p> <p>value collaborating with people, including family members and carers, to respond to, assess, analyse and manage risk of harm and abuse and support the development of care/support planning to promote wellbeing and protection.</p> <p>identify and use appropriate tools, in conjunction with people, families and carers and other professionals promoting early intervention where appropriate.</p> <p>exercise professional judgement and analysis of evidence-informed practice in supporting positive risk taking while managing risk to people, including families and carers and the wider public.</p> <p>use established processes to confidently and effectively challenge decisions, actions or behaviours that are not in the best interests of people, including families and carers or which lead to or increase harm.</p>
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Core learning element 5 - working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts.

	<p>Working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts - develop competence and confidence in managing complexity, risk, and uncertainty in professional decision making.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs enter professional practice in a range of different settings including multidisciplinary teams and integrated services. NQSWs will begin to develop an understanding of their professional identity and how to demonstrate their professional influence within various roles and professional groups. They will be supported to gain knowledge and experience of how to become proactive in responding to the challenges and opportunities that come from evolving social policy and organisational contexts. They will become increasingly competent and confident in their role and manage professional challenges, power dynamics and differences in relation to practice. The NQSW will use supervision appropriately to develop an understanding of working with complexity in unpredictable, unanticipated, and ambiguous contexts. They will develop skills to balance the requirements of their role and any statutory functions, with an enabling and rights-based approach to practice with people, families, carers and communities.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> demonstrate the applied knowledge, skills and theories required for effective social work practice. draw on the concepts of strength, resilience, vulnerability, risk and resistance to understand forms of harm and apply to practice. demonstrate advancing professional confidence, competence and autonomy in managing complex situations within social work practice. recognise the limits of own role, accountability and authority and seek and make effective use of supervision, guidance and support when required. uphold and demonstrate the distinctive role, responsibilities and contribution of social work in partnership working. manage sensitive and confidential information ethically according to agency and legal requirements.

	<p>demonstrate professionalism, professional integrity, self-leadership and emotional intelligence in the management of conflict in relationships and in the decision making process.</p> <p>consolidate and demonstrate appropriate use of professional authority, balancing authority and statutory functions with supporting and enabling others.</p> <p>critically reflect on my adherence to ethical principles and best practice when faced with ethical issues, dilemmas and conflicts.</p> <p>select, use, review and evaluate social work resources and interventions appropriate to people's identified needs and own context of practice. Be creative and develop resources and use of technology where there are gaps in meeting people's identified needs.</p> <p>access, critically evaluate and confidently implement evidence-informed approaches and methods to analyse and manage complex and uncertain situations.</p>
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Core learning element 6 - use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice

	<p>Use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice - develop knowledge and confidence in applying relevant research, policy and legislation to role. Demonstrate commitment to continuous professional learning and inquiry which supports evidence informed practice and a wider culture of learning.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will recognise and value the opportunity to consolidate and continually develop and update the knowledge gained from education to ensure they achieve and maintain a level of practice and best outcomes for people, including families and carers. They will have the opportunity to develop their skills to critically review and apply relevant knowledge from social work practice, professional and academic fields, legislative and policy frameworks and from the lived experience of people, including families and carers. They will seek out opportunities to refresh their knowledge of theory, research and changes to policy and legislation and share this with others. NQSWs should expect and be provided with protected time to learn, professional supervision and relevant learning opportunities and to contribute to the wider culture of learning. They will understand how social workers learn in the workplace and value informal learning opportunities during their NQSW period and beyond.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> take responsibility for recognising gaps in own knowledge and skills and seeking ways of meeting professional developmental needs. engage in reflective dialogue and critical thinking to evaluate and enhance own development and support the development of others. proactively seek and integrate feedback from others on own practice to support development, including from people, families and carers. consolidate knowledge about the social contexts in which people live and the impact of psychological, cultural, socio-economic, environmental and physiological factors on people's lives. consolidate and further develop knowledge of the concepts of attachment, separation and loss, change, trauma and resilience and their impact on people's lives.

	<p>demonstrate and apply knowledge of current relevant law, policy and guidance to my practice, including understanding the supports, limitations and ethical challenges.</p> <p>demonstrate knowledge of and keep up to date with organisational and national policy and practice guidance, legislative changes, to ensure best practice.</p> <p>proactively seek, critically evaluate and apply a range of literature to inform own practice including factual knowledge, theoretical ideas and methodologies.</p> <p>demonstrate research-mindedness using evidence informed approaches and methods to inform assessments, decision making, the management of complex issues and ethical challenges, and to continuously improve outcomes and professional practice.</p> <p>develop digital skills and capabilities for professional practice.</p>
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Core learning element 7 – self-awareness and reflexivity

	<p>Self-awareness and reflexivity – recognise how the demands of professional social work practice affect self and others. Develop the use of reflexivity to consider what has been learned and how this learning can contribute to personal wellbeing and effective and sustainable practice.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>Self-awareness, reflection and reflexivity play a vital role in social work practice. Social workers must be able to critically reflect on and take responsibility for their actions. At the NQSW stage, the worker should create, and be provided with opportunities to practice these skills. The NQSW will demonstrate developing critical analysis and reflection skills, a growing awareness and examining their identity, emotions, reactions and motives and the influence on their actions. They will begin to consciously challenge themselves and others, developing professional curiosity, creativity and self-awareness of the internal and the external influences and challenges of practice. Engagement with professional supervision opportunities is central to professional practice and NQSWs should expect to, and be provided with support, supervision and time to undertake critical reflection and to enhance personal and professional wellbeing and resilience.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognise how work-life balance, personal wellbeing and resilience contribute to effective and sustainable practice. value and practice the use of reflexivity to identify, develop and apply strategies to promote my personal wellbeing. understand the demands of professional practice and demonstrate how to recognise signs of vulnerability in myself, or colleagues and the action required to minimise risks to health. recognise the importance of self and effective use of self within relationships and social work practice. engage and relate effectively and ethically with people, including families and carers and other professionals, demonstrating professional integrity, empathy, and emotional intelligence. recognise organisational roles and responsibilities to support the workforce and manage the impact of demanding and complex workloads.

	<p>develop and apply strategies to deal with professional concerns, conflict, challenges and change.</p> <p>seek and effectively use supervision, consultation and guidance to support critical reflection on practice, review development of skills and knowledge and evaluate professional development.</p> <p>demonstrate an awareness of own strengths, capabilities and personal and professional vulnerabilities and the contribution to and impact they have on own practice.</p> <p>develop and apply skills in workload management, identifying and prioritising work and meeting deadlines.</p>
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Core learning element 8 – professional leadership

	<p>Professional leadership - develop personal and professional authority as a social worker including when working collaboratively across agency and professional boundaries.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>Social workers are members of an internationally recognised profession, protected in Scottish and UK law. Social workers should promote the profession and good practice, taking responsibility for the professional learning and development of self and others. The NQSW will demonstrate an understanding of their professional responsibilities as a registered worker. They will begin to develop their professional identity and understanding of their personal influence and how self-leadership impacts on the profession. Their understanding will further develop by recognising that they are accountable to people, including families and carers, the public, employers and the SSSC.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the core learning elements through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> value, promote and articulate the social work role and how ethical social work practice can make a difference in people’s lives. practice in a way which upholds the social work profession and promotes a positive social work identity. promote the leadership of people, including families and carers, listening to and valuing their lived experience, and supporting and enabling their participation. take initiative and use creative and innovative approaches to support people, including families and carers to achieve their goals. demonstrate leadership skills to motivate, influence and inspire others and improve outcomes. contribute constructively to teamwork and development. demonstrate confidence in leading and contributing to professional and inter-professional meetings, facilitating effective collaboration and managing barriers and challenges.

	<p>take an active role in professional meetings, networks and bodies to support own and others' learning and development.</p> <p>understand my responsibility to seek, plan and undertake ongoing professional development.</p>
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Part two

SSSC registration – continuous professional learning requirements

It is a requirement of Registration that all registered workers maintain a record of continuous professional learning (CPL). NQSWs, supervisors, managers and others involved in supporting NQSWs must be familiar with the core learning elements for social workers - NQSW descriptors and associated mandatory learning activity detailed in part two of this document.

NQSWs must complete as a minimum the mandatory learning activity set by the SSSC during the first 12 or 18 months of registration. Employers will identify any additional specific learning to meet the requirements of the team, service or organisation.

There is an expectation that all social workers are aware of their responsibility and contribution to the protection of vulnerable children and adults from harm. The 'promoting wellbeing, support and protection' core learning element will require NQSWs to evidence completion of mandatory learning activity relevant to protecting both children and adults from harm regardless of their work setting.

The SSSC mandatory learning activity for NQSWs:

- ✓ is based on the core learning elements for social workers.
- ✓ has ethics, values and rights-based practice at the centre.
- ✓ builds on the generic social work education approach in Scotland.
- ✓ supports the consolidation and advancement of professional practice from qualifying education into early career social work.
- ✓ provides an understanding of the unique contribution social work makes in a range of settings and supports professional development relevant to specific roles.
- ✓ values the importance of how social workers learn in the workplace.
- ✓ requires evidence of learning from a variety of sources including work-based examples and formal, informal and self-directed learning.
- ✓ requires NQSWs to use a variety of techniques to demonstrate learning including reflection, research and presentation skills.
- ✓ needs to be planned and recorded on the Individual Development Plan (IDP) to ensure NQSWs can complete within the required timescale.
- ✓ includes learning activity that already happens in organisations.

The validation and endorsement process will confirm a NQSW has met the SSSC CPL registration requirements.

How does it work?

Mandatory learning activity has been specified for each of the eight core learning elements for social workers which must be completed as part of NQSW CPL requirements. The mandatory learning activity is relevant to all registered newly qualified social workers and should be achievable in any work setting.

The activity is intended to be completed during the first 12 to 18 months of registration and will require planning to ensure there is sufficient time to complete the activity. The mandatory learning activity is numbered for convenience and should be completed in a way that is most useful for learning. All NQSWs are encouraged to use an Individual Development Plan (IDP) to plan and review learning with their supervisor and include any organisational specific learning in the IDP.

The core learning elements are intended to be considered holistically. Mandatory learning activity will provide learning across more than one core learning element as mapped in Appendix 2.

The grid below (figure 1) provides an overview of all mandatory learning activity, and the detail of what is required for each activity is set out individually in the remainder of this document. Detail provided for each mandatory learning activity includes:

- identifying the relevant core learning element
- the focus of learning
- the mandatory learning activity

If you wish to explore any of the core learning elements further, suggestions for additional learning will be published on the NQSW website.

Types of learning

The mandatory learning activity draws on research which supports our understanding of how social workers learn⁴ and, where possible, evidence is linked to practice experiences and examples of work.

Activities include:

- self-directed learning: undertaking your own learning such as reading, research or visits.
- formal learning: attending organisational induction and training relevant to your role or a lecture or a training event.
- active practice learning: navigating tasks, learning through doing, working out problems.
- learning through reflection on experience: thinking about what happened, what you learned and what you need to do next.

⁴ Ferguson, G (2022) [The importance of workplace learning for social workers](#). Iriss

- learning through others: using practice wisdom, expertise of colleagues, a conversation you are involved in, listening to, shadowing or working with different professionals, listening and talking to people with lived experience.
- learning from lived experiences: using knowledge from the experiences of people who use services and their families and carers.
- learning by chance: recognising learning from unexpected opportunities that happen in practice.

Evidencing learning

The mandatory learning activity requires NQSWs to capture their learning in a variety of ways including reflective writing, audio recordings, visual representation such as mind maps, presentations and reflection on examples from practice. NQSWs are also expected to lead discussions with colleagues, research and share learning with others. The range of learning activity reflects the skills that social workers need to develop during the early career stage within different social work settings. In some instances, resources are specified, but most learning activity is general to encourage research and creativity.

It is the NQSW's responsibility to maintain a record and evidence of their CPL activity. The NQSW could use a digital solution such as the SSSC MyLearning app or an identified secure folder on Microsoft Teams to store and share additional evidence. NQSWs are asked to list and/or link any relevant learning activity to the NQSW CPL review template and share as part of supervision on a regular basis.

Where evidence is being drawn from data already stored on the organisation's management system such as examples of assessments/ reports, supervision discussions, or corporate learning, it is sufficient to note the location or hyperlink to the relevant examples on the NQSW CPL review template as the supervisor will be able to access these secure links.

Figure 1 Overview mandatory learning activity

		Core learning elements							
		01 	02 	03 	04 	05 	06 	07 	08 
		Ethics, values and rights-based practice	Communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice	Critical thinking, professional judgement, and decision making	Promoting wellbeing, support, and protection	Working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts	Use of knowledge, research, and evidence in practice	Self-awareness and reflexivity	Professional leadership
Mandatory learning activity	Intersectionality and anti-discriminatory practice	Trauma-informed practice	Critical thinking and analysis	Child protection	Working with risk	Using evidence to inform practice	Resilience and wellbeing	Professional identity	
	Rights based practice	Communication, engagement, and empowerment	Decision making	Adult support and protection	Working with conflict	Applying knowledge of approaches and interventions	Critical reflection and reflexivity	Leadership	
	Applying knowledge of social inequality and systemic oppression	Relationship-based practice			Professional curiosity and challenge				

Mandatory learning activity



Ethics, values and rights-based practice – develop an understanding of and apply ethical principles and values to all aspects of professional practice. Recognise sources and impact of social inequality and systemic oppression. Take action to protect and advocate for human rights and social justice, including development of an anti-racist, intersectional approach.

Focus **1.1** Intersectionality and anti-discriminatory practice.

Mandatory learning activity

Explore relevant research and evidence about intersectionality and relate this to the work of your team. Present information to your team about the importance of understanding intersectionality for social work services.

Evidence an understanding of cultural competence and what it means in relation to your practice.

Consider what you know about unconscious bias and racism in social work. Write a personal reflection on your commitment to anti-racism in social work practice and discuss this in supervision.

Consider the barriers to inclusive practice experienced by both workers and people who use a service which exist in your workplace. Explore how these can be addressed and removed. Identify actions that you will take to promote inclusivity.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 1: ethics, values and rights-based practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Ethics, values and rights-based practice – develop an understanding of and apply ethical principles and values to all aspects of professional practice. Recognise sources and impact of social inequality and systemic oppression. Take action to protect and advocate for human rights and social justice, including development of an anti-racist, intersectional approach.

Focus **1.2** Rights-based practice.

Mandatory learning activity

Reflect on how your social work practice is grounded in the principles of human rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, embedded in Scottish legislation. Provide an example from your practice where you have taken action to protect and advocate for human rights and social justice.

Evidence, through discussion in supervision or an example from your practice, how you have ensured that people, including families and carers, are aware of and understand their rights and can act on them.

Discuss your understanding and ability to manage the complex balance of rights with risk and protection.

Evidence, through discussion in supervision, ethical practice in the recording and sharing of sensitive information about people, including families and carers. Identify actions that you will take to ensure ethical practice in handling sensitive information.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 1: ethics, values and rights-based practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Ethics, values and rights-based practice – develop an understanding of and apply ethical principles and values to all aspects of professional practice. Recognise sources and impact of social inequality and systemic oppression. Take action to protect and advocate for human rights and social justice, including development of an anti-racist, intersectional approach.

Focus **1.3** Applying knowledge of social inequality and systemic oppression.

Mandatory learning activity

Create a map of local services that support an anti-poverty approach or provide welfare support. Reflect on how you and your team engage with them. Identify any implications for practice and actions that can be taken to support engagement.

Review three of your previous assessments or reports and audit how you have included analysis of the impact of social inequality and oppression on a person or family when developing a plan for support.

Explain how you would identify systemic oppression and inequality in your setting and how you would respond to or challenge this.

Evidence how you use a social justice approach in your practice and manage the authority and powers associated with your social work role.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 1: ethics, values and rights-based practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice – demonstrate knowledge and skills to support effective communication, collaboration and relationship-based practice in a range of settings. Use trauma responsive approaches to actively involve and support the involvement of people, including families and carers to plan, implement and evaluate interventions.

Focus **2.1** Trauma-informed practice.

Mandatory learning activity

Using the national trauma training resource, complete the level appropriate to your role.

Reflect on how you use trauma informed approaches in your practice, considering how you actively involve and support the participation of individuals, families and carers.

Explore the links between the impacts of social inequality and systemic oppression and trauma. Identify any implications and actions for your practice.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 2: communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice – demonstrate knowledge and skills to support effective communication, collaboration and relationship-based practice in a range of settings. Use trauma responsive approaches to actively involve and support the involvement of people, including families and carers to plan, implement and evaluate interventions.

Focus **2.2** Communication, engagement and empowerment.

Mandatory learning activity

Demonstrate how you understand people who use services as experts in their own lives.

Identify the different communication and engagement approaches, including digital capabilities you require for your role to ensure engagement is inclusive, culturally responsive and challenges stigma. Reflect on areas of strength and areas for development.

Provide an example from your practice where you have empowered individuals, families or carers in the planning, implementation and evaluation of an intervention or service.

Review your organisation’s policies and procedures for recording, assessment and report writing and consider any implications for your practice.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 2: communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice – demonstrate knowledge and skills to support effective communication, collaboration and relationship-based practice in a range of settings. Use trauma responsive approaches to actively involve and support the involvement of people, including families and carers to plan, implement and evaluate interventions.

Focus **2.3** Relationship-based practice.

Mandatory learning activity

Review and reflect on your strengths and areas of development in undertaking relationship-based practice.

Give an example of how you are developing your ability to use your professional authority as a social worker and working collaboratively with colleagues and professionals across different agencies.

Critically reflect on a practice situation that has challenged your professional boundaries and relationship with an individual, family, carer or colleague. Identify what worked well and what you might do differently next time.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 2: communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making - develop competence and confidence in applying critical thinking, analysis, research, and best practice to inform professional judgement and decision making in all areas of practice including assessment and review.

Focus **3.1** Critical thinking and analysis.

Mandatory learning activity

Complete the activities in IRISS course 'Writing analysis in social care.'

Critically reflect on report writing comparing one of your own reports with one completed by an experienced practitioner. Compare how information has been analysed and presented in the reports and identify best practice and points of learning.

Identify how you ensure that your writing reflects the interests and perspectives of the people about whom you are writing. Discuss with a colleague or supervisor.

Read practitioner guidance on chronologies. Complete a chronology, review it with a colleague or supervisor and reflect on the importance of this tool in your practice.

Reflect on a situation where you have shared your thinking and analysis in a formal setting. Explore your feelings about undertaking this task. Identify actions you can take next time you are in this situation.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 3: critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making - develop competence and confidence in applying critical thinking, analysis, research, and best practice to inform professional judgement and decision making in all areas of practice including assessment and review.

Focus **3.2** Decision making.

Mandatory learning activity

Reflect on the process of gathering information when undertaking an assessment. Consider what you found helpful in the process of gathering information and how you decided what was relevant to the assessment.

Describe how a piece of research helped to inform your decision making in a practice situation.

Discuss with a supervisor a decision making process from your practice. Identify the skills you used when communicating the decision and rationale with individuals, families, carers and professionals. Reflect on areas you found difficult and identify actions you can take to improve your practice confidence.

Consider a significant case review that has been undertaken in children or adult services. Reflect on the use of professional judgement and decision making. Identify actions you can take to incorporate learning from the review, to develop your professional judgement and decision making capabilities.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 3: critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Promoting wellbeing, support and protection – demonstrate and apply understanding of responsibility to actively promote the wellbeing, support and protection of children and adults at risk of harm, regardless of setting or context.

Focus 4.1 Child protection.

Mandatory learning activity

Familiarise yourself with national and local child protection guidance and procedures including the role of the local child protection/ public protection committee. Identify your key responsibilities as a social worker and what your role is in your organisation and on a multi-agency level to act on concerns about a child.

Access child protection training within your organisation or local area and discuss your key learning with your supervisor or colleague(s).

Identify a key area related to the wellbeing and protection of children relevant to your practice. Review current research and/or policy in relation to this area and relate it to practice in your organisation. Identify any actions you and/or your organisation can take to improve practice in this area.

Provide evidence of a reflective discussion with your supervisor/mentor about the thresholds of risk in child protection.

Create a mind map or equivalent that demonstrates your understanding of the intersections between child protection and the vulnerability, trauma and risk experienced by adults.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 4: promoting wellbeing, support and protection but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Promoting wellbeing, support and protection – demonstrate and apply understanding of responsibility to actively promote the wellbeing, support and protection of children and adults at risk of harm, regardless of setting or context.

Focus 4.2 Adult support and protection.

Mandatory learning activity

Familiarise yourself with national and local adult support and protection guidance and procedures including the role of the local adult protection/public protection committee. Identify your key responsibilities as a social worker and what your role is in your organisation and on a multi-agency level to act on concerns about an adult.

Access adult support and protection training within your organisation or local area and discuss your key learning with your supervisor or colleague(s).

Read the principles of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000 and identify when and how you would use these when considering rights, risk and protection of adults.

Learn how you would make effective use of local advocacy services. Identify your role in supporting people involved in adult support and protection proceedings and consider how you can support them to participate and communicate in decisions and forums.

Create a mind map or equivalent that considers the intersectional nature of risk, trauma and harm. Reflect on the challenges of accessing support and the impact of structural disadvantage which may impact on adult protection.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 4: promoting wellbeing, support and protection but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts
- develop competence and confidence in managing complexity, risk, and uncertainty in professional decision making.

Focus **5.1** Working with risk.

Mandatory learning activity

Explore concepts of risk assessment, risk management and risk tolerance. Reflect on your organisation’s approach to risk and discuss with a supervisor or colleague how this influences your practice.

Evidence discussion with your supervisor/team/other professionals on personal and organisational thresholds to risk. Compare this with other professional thresholds, and how you will manage ethical dilemmas in your practice.

Reflect on an example from practice in which you had to identify risk, the levels of risk and protective factors. Consider what informed your approach, how decisions were reached, and how challenges were addressed. Identify what you learned and how you will use this learning in the future.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 5: working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts

- develop competence and confidence in managing complexity, risk, and uncertainty in professional decision making.

Focus **5.2** Working with conflict.

Mandatory learning activity

Reflect on your understanding of 'conflict,' 'challenge' and 'resistance' and how these present in social work practice. Reflect on whether such terms are used in your organisation and how this influences your practice.

Consider how you approach having challenging conversations with individuals, families and others while remaining committed to relationship-based practice. Think about the knowledge, skills and values you can use. Identify any actions for your practice.

Engage in reflective discussion with your supervisor, team or mentor about a situation where another professional, an individual or a family you are working with has shown hostile and resistant behaviour. Consider how you responded, and what impact this had on you. Identify what you have learned from this and any actions for your practice.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 5: working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts
- develop competence and confidence in managing complexity, risk, and uncertainty in professional decision making.

Focus **5.3** Professional curiosity and challenge.

Mandatory learning activity

Research and reflect on the opportunities and potential barriers to professional curiosity and identify what skills, knowledge and supports you might need to develop an effective approach in your practice. Identify factors that contribute to professional dangerousness.

Provide evidence of a discussion with your supervisor about a time when you have had to question your own assumptions about an individual or family with which you are working. Consider what you did and identify what you might do differently next time.

Act as a critical friend for a peer or have a peer act as a critical friend on a complex or uncertain case. Reflect on observations and learning brought about by this process. Identify the actions you will take as a result.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 5: working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice - develop knowledge and confidence in applying relevant research, policy and legislation to role. Demonstrate commitment to continuous professional learning and inquiry which supports evidence informed practice and a wider culture of learning.

Focus **6.1** Using evidence to inform practice.

Mandatory learning activity

Complete the Social Services Knowledge Scotland (SSKS) Knowledge and Evidence Open Badges.

Complete the Iriss Navigating Evidence reflective tool.

Evaluate a piece of research relevant to your role and share information with others. Discuss its strengths and limitations and demonstrate how it contributed to outcomes.

Review how you have used feedback from people who use services and carers to inform your practice and service delivery. Create a plan to ensure that this remains at the centre of your practice.

Evidence a situation where you identified a gap in your knowledge and reflect on how you took responsibility to fill that gap.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 6: use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice - develop knowledge and confidence in applying relevant research, policy and legislation to role. Demonstrate commitment to continuous professional learning and inquiry which supports evidence informed practice and a wider culture of learning.

Focus **6.2** Applying knowledge of approaches and interventions.

Mandatory learning activity

Identify and list local and national legislation, policy and guidance that underpins your role. Discuss with a colleague or supervisor and identify any gaps in your knowledge.
Evidence your understanding of how Self-directed Support (SDS) is relevant to your role.

Reflect on your application of an evidence informed approach in a complex situation. Consider why you adopted this approach, what it involved, how you applied it and what impact it had on outcomes.

Lead a 5-minute informal team discussion on a piece of research, theory or framework relevant to your role.

Demonstrate how you have related a theory to a practice situation.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 6: use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Self-awareness and reflexivity – recognise how the demands of professional social work practice affect self and others. Develop the use of reflexivity to consider what has been learned and how this learning can contribute to personal wellbeing and effective and sustainable practice.

Focus **7.1** Resilience and wellbeing.

Mandatory learning activity

Identify your organisation's responsibilities to support staff wellbeing and understand your own responsibilities within these.

Develop the use of reflective and reflexive practice in your professional development and explore how this can contribute to your wellbeing.

Identify and discuss with your manager/supervisor the professional actions that will support your wellbeing and contribute to the wellbeing of your wider team.

Consider your own emotional responses when coping with a variety of difficult situations. Explore how you recognise and respond to the signs of vulnerability in yourself and others. Identify what supports you might need to help you when working and responding in these situations.

Research national initiatives and resources available to support wellbeing in the sector such as the National Wellbeing Hub. Share learning with colleagues.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 7: self-awareness and reflexivity but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Self-awareness and reflexivity – recognise how the demands of professional social work practice affect self and others. Develop the use of reflexivity to consider what has been learned and how this learning can contribute to personal wellbeing and effective and sustainable practice.

Focus **7.2** Critical reflection and reflexivity.

Mandatory learning activity

Provide evidence of how you have used supervision or advice from a mentor to critically reflect on your own practice and development.

Critically reflect on your awareness of how your use of self, impacts on developing and sustaining effective relationships with individuals, families, carers and other professionals.

Use a tool or map to demonstrate how you use critical reflection when managing complex situations. Demonstrate how you have developed competence and confidence in critical reflection when managing complex situations in your practice.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 7: self-awareness and reflexivity but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Professional leadership - develop personal and professional authority as a social worker including when working collaboratively across agency and professional boundaries.

Focus **8.1** Professional identity.

Mandatory learning activity

Reflect on the SSSC Code of Practice for Social Service Workers and discuss any ethical dilemmas this raises for you as a registered social worker.

Roleplay or rehearse how you will explain your social worker role in a variety of settings.

Use a reflective model, framework, tool or journal to examine your professional identity. Consider how you see your role as a social worker; what kind of social worker you are; what values you believe you have and how you demonstrate them.

Seek feedback on your practice from people who use services, colleagues and other stakeholders to help you understand yourself, and your role.

In supervision explore the tension between organisational, legal and professional requirements and social work values.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 8: professional leadership but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.



Professional leadership - develop personal and professional authority as a social worker including when working collaboratively across agency and professional boundaries.

Focus **8.2** Leadership.

Mandatory learning activity

Map your professional network of colleagues, supervisors, and other professionals.

Reflect on the ways in which you think you have a leadership role as an NQSW and how you can influence professional, ethical and rights-based responses in social work practice.

Explore the SSSC Step into Leadership website. Complete the SSSC Frontline Worker Leadership Capability Feedback Tool and leadership capabilities workbook.

Contribute to the learning and development of others through activities such as peer reviewing a report, giving feedback to a co-worker or undertaking a practice audit.

Please note, this mandatory learning activity relates most closely to core learning element 8: professional leadership but all core learning elements are interconnected and should be considered holistically.

Appendix 1. Ethical principles

Ethical principles in social work apply from the beginning of qualifying education in a social worker's career, through the transition to the newly qualified practitioner and beyond. Social work emphasises the importance of building a positive, professional relationship with people, including families and carers as well as with professional colleagues. Negotiating ethical practice at every level within the complexity of social work tasks and therapeutic interventions must balance rights and self-determination against a duty of care and public protection.

In all these situations, social workers must recognise and put aside any personal prejudices they may have, and work within guiding ethical principles and accepted codes of professional conduct. Social workers must demonstrate ethical commitment within all aspects of professional practice. The ethical principles described in this document are consistent across the Standards in Social Work Education and developed and agreed in partnership with academics, employers, other stakeholders and the SSSC following the Review of Social Work Education.

These principles are also at the heart of the Health and Social Care Standards and The Promise. The SSSC Codes of Practice also sit alongside the ethical principles. The Codes set out the standards of professional conduct and practice that social workers must meet.

Social workers must also be able to understand the implications of, and to work effectively and sensitively with, people whose cultures, beliefs or life experiences are different from their own.

The ethical principles say that social workers must:

Principle	This means
Social justice	Embrace values such as the equal worth of all citizens and their right to meet their basic needs and have equal access to wealth, health, wellbeing, justice and opportunity. This involves commitment to the principles of social justice and taking responsibility for promoting it and challenging injustice.
Respecting diversity	Recognise and respect diversity, challenging negative discrimination on the basis of age; gender or sex; gender identity; sexual orientation; religion; spiritual beliefs; culture; ethnicity; socio-economic status; ability; racial or other physical characteristics. This also involves treating the individual as a whole person within family, cultural, community, societal and political contexts.

Human rights and dignity	Respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people and their rights as defined within the legislation. This also involves conveying empathy and compassion for people.
Self-determination	Facilitate peoples' right to self-determination, and respect peoples' rights to make their own choices and informed decisions, irrespective of their values and life choices, providing this does not threaten the rights and safety of others.
Partnership, participation and co-production	Promote the full involvement and participation of people receiving services, as far as they are able, in ways that address what matters to them and enables them to be empowered, unless it compromises the safety and wellbeing of self or others. This also involves identifying, developing and valuing the strengths and resources of people and communities.
Honesty and integrity	Appropriate use of self, maintaining personal and professional boundaries, honesty, responsible confidentiality management, and not abusing the trust of people receiving services. This also means taking responsibility for making ethical and evidence informed decisions and being accountable for actions.

Appendix 2. Mandatory learning activity mapping

Core learning element								
Mandatory learning activity								
Adult Support and Protection				X	X	X		X
Applying knowledge of approaches and interventions		X			X	X		
Applying knowledge of social inequality and systemic oppression	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Child Protection				X	X	X		X
Communication, engagement and empowerment		X			X	X		X
Critical reflection and reflexivity		X	X		X		X	
Critical thinking and analysis	X	X	X			X		
Decision making	X	X	X		X		X	
Intersectionality and anti-discriminatory practice	X	X	X				X	
Leadership								X
Professional curiosity and challenge		X	X	X	X			X
Professional identity	X						X	X
Relationship-based practice	X	X						X
Resilience and wellbeing							X	X
Rights-based practice	X			X		X		
Trauma-informed practice	X	X	X	X		X		
Working with conflict			X	X	X			
Working with risk		X			X		X	X
Using evidence to inform practice	X	X	X			X	X	



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